

**Rhode Island Department of Education
and
East Providence Public Schools**

Face-to-Face Meeting Report and Agreement

March 27, 2002

Overview

A "Face-to-Face" meeting between the East Providence school district and the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) occurred on March 27, 2002. The meeting was scheduled as a result of RIDE identifying six East Providence schools as "low performing," based upon four years of student assessment data. The "Face-to-Face" meeting is the first step in the ongoing process of accountability for school improvement entitled Progressive Support and Intervention. It is designed to allow the school district to address its capacity to engage in the four core processes of school improvement: self-study, planning, implementation, and evaluation. The meeting report is a public recitation of the steps to be taken in the district to increase student achievement in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics over the ensuing year.

Schools: Kent Heights Elementary School, Edward Martin Middle School, Riverside Middle School, East Providence High School, East Providence Career and Technical Center, Educational Development Center

Attending from East Providence: Dr. Taras J. Herbowy, Superintendent; Manny Vinhateiro, Assistant Superintendent; Dr. Jackie Forbes, Director of Elementary Education; J. Michael Rock, Director of Special Needs; David Britto, Principal, Kent Heights School; George E. Burke, Principal, Martin Middle School; Shani Wallace, Assistant Principal, Martin Middle School; William Fontes, Principal, Riverside Middle School; Lee-Ann Towne, Riverside Middle School; Toni-Marie Spencer, Principal, East Providence High School; Karen Antonelli, East Providence High School Improvement Team Chair; Stephen J. Propatier, Director, East Providence Area Career and Technical Center; Patricia Dionne, East Providence Career and Technical Center; Roberta Brady, East Providence Education Association President/kindergarten teacher; Pam Murray, East Providence; Isadore Ramos, East Providence School Committee.

RIDE Staff: David V. Abbott, Interim Assistant Commissioner; Dr. Dennis Cheek, Director, Office of Research, High School Reform, and Adult Education; Ellen Hedlund, Office of Assessment; Elizabeth Hyman, Office of Assessment; George McDonough, Office of Integrated Social Services; Mat Santos, Director, Office of Equity and Access; Cathy Shulbaum, Office of Special Needs Services; Nancy Warren, Office of Research, High School Reform, and Adult Education.

RIDE Welcome and Meeting Orientation

Interim Assistant Commissioner David V. Abbott welcomed the group, and gave an overview of the process and objectives of the meeting. Each meeting follows a similar format. The school district is asked to begin with a presentation on the status of school and district efforts to improve student achievement in English language arts and mathematics. RIDE staff then responds to the school district's presentation, and adds comments based upon data analyses performed prior to the meeting. District and school officials next describe future plans to add or modify action plans to improve teaching and learning, and identify existing or prospective barriers to implementation. The meeting is designed to conclude with shared expectations of the respective roles of the school, school district, and RIDE to support ongoing school improvement efforts. Commissioner Abbott further noted that the meeting would result in a report to be made public at an upcoming meeting of the East Providence School Committee.

School District Presentation

Representatives from East Providence were given the opportunity to respond to the impact of the school performance designations in the district, and to describe current school improvement efforts. Dr. Taras Herbowy, Superintendent, stated that the district uses data to determine areas of focus for program improvement, and that the district is committed to strategic plan design and implementation. The district strategic plan is well-informed by community participation. It is in constant use by principals, who are required to reference the plan prior to modification of their action plans to ensure alignment with district initiatives. Curriculum reform has been a primary focus area over the last five years. Mathematics and English language arts curricula were recently completed, and foreign languages are currently in process.

Kent Heights School

Principal David Britto stated that he does not consider his school to be low performing and feels that Kent Heights is moving forward. The school has a great staff and students, and a very viable, 10-member, school improvement team (although teacher involvement could be more consistent). Among the initiatives undertaken to improve student performance is the identification of 14 students in 4th grade who fall short of achieving the math standard. Together with Barbara Traverse, the teachers of these students are improving their own instruction, as well as working with parents to examine student work. The Superintendent added that many of these students were identified with special needs.

David Britto identified a number of needs and issues that, if addressed, may positively impact school performance. These include:

- Initiating a professional development partnership with one or more higher education institutions;

- Visiting districts and schools that are relatively high performing so that teachers can observe their peers;
- Undertaking a different approach for mentors, such as making use of support staff in the building for mathematics and problem solving;
- Reviewing Title I funds to determine whether these funds are maximally used to support student achievement;
- Instituting an all-day Kindergarten; and
- Examining all partnerships and determining the feasibility of using CBOs to develop effective 21st Century Learning Centers and Reading 1st initiatives.

Martin Middle School

George Burke, Principal, and Shani Wallace, Assistant Principal, provided information about Martin Middle School. George Burke stated that faculty and staff were disturbed and surprised by the drop in writing skills. Referring to the SALT report recommendations, Burke said that staff turnover has been a significant problem at Martin Middle School and has resulted in the employment of mostly young, non-tenured teachers. Although these new teachers teach to standards, much of the older faculty is resistant to change.

Structurally, the school is not organized well. Square footage is not adequate for the programs, and the physical plant is deteriorating. With regard to school climate, there is no sense of culture, which is exacerbated by confusion due to a lack of staff stability. State homes and DCYF placements cause students to cycle in and out of the school, further impeding school cohesion.

Despite these obstacles, Martin Middle School has made progress. To address everyday issues that are overwhelming to many families in the community, a family partnership program provides 25 ESL parents with instruction in English and training to help their children with homework assignments. George Burke stated that staff is emphasizing middle level philosophies and teaching to standards. Tracking has been eliminated as of this year. "KITES" curriculum work and standards training have taken place. The staff is involved in Chicago Math and they are experimenting with a seven period schedule.

Principal Burke made a plea for stability in order to maintain these efforts. He requested state and district assistance with professional development in the areas of writing, mentoring and standards-driven instruction. In addition, he articulated the need for support staff to keep students on site for after-school and homework help. Finally, he expressed the need for both a psychologist and a social worker, full-time, on-site.

Superintendent Herbowy reiterated that the school and district are working to support middle school philosophies and demands. To address teacher quality, he has worked

with staff from the Office of Teacher Preparation, Certification, and Professional Development to determine what additional courses teachers need to be certified as middle school teachers. In complement, he has worked out agreements with higher education to provide this instruction to those teachers. According to Dr. Herbowy, staff and teachers are capable, but Martin Middle School's physical plant cannot support the reform efforts. The school's one thousand students must pass through other areas to get to their core areas; a demoralizing expedition for both students and staff. Dr. Herbowy anticipates a 40 million dollar bond issue, and recognizes the difficulty connected with selling this publicly.

Riverside Middle School

William Fontes, Principal, and Lee-Ann Towne provided information about Riverside Middle School. Principal William Fontes disagreed with Riverside's classification as a low performing school, and described the less than optimal circumstances which occurred both before and during the administration of the state assessments. He stated that students were very upset that they were classified as a low performing school. Mr. Fontes also pointed to a recent, very favorable SALT visit report as indicative of the positive direction in which the school is moving.

Standards-based instruction has been embraced by the teachers of Riverside Middle School. Rubrics are posted in classrooms, there are computers in every class, and reading tutors in each of the two "Houses" comprising the school. All 6th graders have writing assessments. There are monthly math problems in all grades, and a math skills class is offered in addition to math class. Silent reading time occurs every week. A weekly communicator is sent home every week, and a homework hotline is available after 3:00 PM. An extensive list of school activities was presented, including foreign language, entrepreneurial and robotics electives. The physical structure of the building has resulted in the need for house leaders. The employment of these house leaders precludes hiring staff such as department chairs, who would promote programmatic and instructional improvements. Principal Fontes concluded his remarks by guaranteeing that Riverside will not be classified as a low performing school after this year.

East Providence High School

Toni-Marie Spencer, Principal, spoke for East Providence High School. She and her staff were very disappointed about being classified as a low performing school. She has since made herself available for staff and parent meetings to discuss the high school's performance designation. There is a perception among parents and students that the tests are not important, and as a result, are not taken seriously. The principal has visited every classroom to promote the importance of the results of this assessment. Some students are making posters to hang up around the school encouraging students to take tests seriously, and teachers have been doing a good job of explaining tests to students. In addition, the PSTA newsletter includes information about the state test. Finally, regarding testing, the principal explained that having students take the mathematics assessment after a week of completing the English language arts (ELA) assessment is exhausting to students.

The principal then focused on school initiatives. Members of the staff have begun compiling a literacy handbook that will include rubrics in writing. This has generated a competition among teachers. Every 9th grade student received a homework and study habits book, along with a planner, and were disappointed that they did not receive them again in the 10th grade. The school is connected to the community and its resources through the Trinity Repertory Company, URI and the Crusader's Program. Regular education students, partnered with special education students in an innovative program are exceeding expectations. A mentoring program provides incentives to encourage attendance.

The School Improvement Team involves every teacher in the building, including teachers in the career center. Meetings are held monthly, and recommendations have been developed in four different areas. These meetings have offered teachers an opportunity to show leadership skills that they wouldn't have been able to do otherwise. Parent involvement has been sparse.

The school is working on developing small learning communities. All students receive the same curricula but because there are many levels at the high school, schedules are very individualized. In other words, a student can take a high level English class, and a low level math class. The Program of Studies is being revised. Courses are weighted for class placement; however, the weighting does not affect a student's grade point average.

Toni Marie Spencer described efforts to assist ESL students with the assessments. For example, students who think in a language other than English are naturally apprehensive about the ELA tests. To counter this, the school ensures the presence of an ESL teacher in the testing room. Likewise, when resource students are taking the test, a resource teacher is present. She expressed concern that the length of the test has a negative effect, and that block scheduling doesn't work well with the state assessment guidelines, because the entire school has to be re-scheduled to accommodate the testing schedule. Finally, Principal Spencer noted that she no longer has a Reading specialist at the high school, who is sorely missed.

East Providence Career and Technical Center

Steve Propatier, Director, East Providence Career and Technical Center requested implementation of a student identification number system so that published information about students is accurate. He stated that career and technical education teachers think it's not their job to address test results of students. Teachers have been working on statewide curricula, and there is one in place for almost every subject area. Lesson plans have been developed for at least six areas, and have been designed to accommodate various learning styles. New Standards have been infused into career and technical education curricula. Students have to do an oral presentation, a demonstration, a written description of the demonstration, and complete an explanation for evaluation. Teachers have been involved in various professional development activities. Regarding the assessment tool, Steve Propatier told the group that some

students freeze when they take the test, that some kind of practical application should be included, and that it would be helpful to break up the two-hour test.

Toni-Marie Spencer added to the discussion by emphasizing that career and technical education students from different sending districts aren't part of the system, and yet are products of the system. In other words, the district is responsible for the performance of out-of-district students despite the fact that East Providence plays no role in teaching those students prior to placement. Dr. Dennis Cheek, Director, Office of Research, High School Reform, and Adult Education, responded that several impulses, including a core indicator-driven performance approach, exist in the career and technical education system due to Perkins III legislation. He expects reauthorization to result in a Perkins IV that looks a lot more like ESEA. Academic achievement counts for career and technical education students, which is why they're pulled out of the high school reports, reported separately for career and technical centers, and included in high school reports as well.

Educational Development Center

Taras Herbowy said that the Educational Development Center is a career center, and that there will probably not be enough students for a program there next year. He suggested instead an alternative program in the upcoming year and has been discussing the matter with UCAP's Rob DeBlois.

RIDE Analysis/Recommendations

The inter-disciplinary team from RIDE made a series of observations based on its review of planning documents, assessment data, SALT survey results, SALT visit report, Office of Special Needs' School Support visit report, NEASC information, direct observation and discussion within this meeting:

- There are significant and disturbing equity gaps between males and females, and among ethnic groups at Martin and Riverside Middle Schools. At East Providence High School, there is an equity gap between the performance of special education and regular education students on the writing and reading assessments. The district needs to formulate specific strategies to address these gaps in performance by first determining whether the root cause lies in unequal access to appropriate instruction, lowered expectations, numbers of levels of instruction, or need for increased articulation across levels within each curriculum.
- There needs to be a comprehensive approach to improving the stability of faculty in Riverside Middle School.
- The high school met no targets in Writing, suggesting the need for an increased focus on all aspects of writing across disciplines.

- At Martin Middle School, performance declined for all ELA subtests, as measured by the percentage of students meeting or exceeding the standard.
- Kent Heights witnessed a significant decrease in Math Skills, as did the high school.
- While progress has been made, courses in the high school are still too segmented. Too many students are seeing questions on the test for the first time. There is a lack of equity of instruction across the grades or levels. Formative assessments need to be implemented throughout the system on a regular basis. This will drive instruction, and pace of instruction.
- Dennis Cheek inquired what percentage of East Providence High School students go on to college, and whether the relationship between students who do well on state tests and those who go on to college had been determined. Staff did not know.
- The high school needs to address the extremely high number of “No Scores” (70).
- Middle schools could benefit from additional focus on higher order conceptual thinking and problem solving. The mathematics approach appears to break down after the 7th grade.

RIDE/District Agreement

- The district will continue its work with the East Bay Collaborative and Charles Mojkowski in order to design activities for principals, which will include looking at cohorts and equity gaps to strengthen data-driven decision-making. By disaggregating information and working with test results, the district will address some of the issues that have been identified through the test results.
- The district will work toward implementation of a high school level reading remediation program, including the establishment of a literacy base for all students.
- The district will continue identification of needs for guidance counselors system-wide.
- The Superintendent will establish an articulation mechanism for curriculum planning among the elementary, middle and the high school levels.
- Jackie Forbes will continue working with the instructional steering committee, central office administrators, teachers, and outside consultants to further standards-based curriculum development efforts. Writing standards, benchmarked papers, an

instrument for evaluating curriculum, and appropriate assessment tools will be incorporated into the process.

- The district will avail itself of the external assessment advisory committee in order to register concerns regarding the state assessment.
- The district will examine its capacity and infrastructure in regard to its ability to support school improvement efforts, especially in regard to developing increased consistency of instructional practices and developing stronger links between school improvement strategies and professional development for instructional staff.
- The district will support increased student support initiatives, including organizing around smaller learning communities, developing additional after-school supports, and increasing the role for parents in the education process.